

Bible Translation History: Kiswahili Bible

KENYA, UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA, UGANDA, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, BURUNDI, RWANDA

The translation of the Bible into Kiswahili (Swahili language) can be credited to pioneer missionary Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf. He was a German missionary sent to East Africa by the British Church Missionary Society. Though his stay at Rabai at the Kenyan Coast was brief (1844 – 1853), his mastery of Kiswahili to a level of translation is very impressive. In May 1844 Krapf began translating Genesis into Kimvita Kiswahili (the dialect of Kiswahili used in Mombasa). He translated only three chapters and eager to do everything at once began translating the New Testament. It is recorded that by 1846 Krapf had translated most of the New Testament. The entire New Testament in Kimvita Kiswahili was however completed around 1850. Even though Krapf did not do any serious socio-linguistic survey of Kenyan coastal Swahili, his choice of Kimvita was well founded. He intuitively understood the pivotal importance of Swahili in this part of Africa. There is no doubt nonetheless that Krapf's pioneering Swahili research provided a significant and lasting contribution of Swahili lexicography and linguistics and formed an important foundation for the translation of the Kiswahili Bible.

In the 1920s, standardization of the language became an issue and the Kiunguja dialect spoken in Zanzibar was favored. In 1928, consideration was given to the question of having a common Kiwahili Bible in standard Kiswahili bringing together Kimvita (Mombasa) and Kiugunja (Zanzibar) versions as well as other works. The New Testament in the Kiswahili Union Version appeared in 1950 followed by the Old Testament in 1952.

The renowned Swahili Union Version has been the leading Kiswahili Bible in East Africa. It is however the new Biblia Habari Njema which has, from its inception, been an inter-denominational and international effort. Scholars from both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, and from both Kenya and Tanzania, participated in the translation work. It is the first major Kiswahili translation for which East Africans themselves have been wholly responsible and in which they have fully participated at all levels. The translation began in 1973. The Habari Njema translation was completed in 1996.

There have been at least 5 major complete versions in Kiswahili:

- o Kiugunja (1891)
- o Kimvita (1914)
- o The Roehl (1937)
- o Swahili Union (1952)
- o Habari Njema (1996)

Kiswahili is spoken widely among the three East African countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania as well as in Rwanda, Burundi and Eastern Congo.